DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 057 081 TM 000 924

AUTHOR Lieberman, Ann
TITLE Problems in Making Feedback Useful to School Staff.
PUB DATE Feb 71
NOTE 7p.; From symposium "Feeding Back Information Collected From School Staffs," American Educational Research Association, New York, New York, February 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies (Education); Educational Problems; *Feedback; Formative Evaluation; Information Utilization; Research Methodology; *Research Problems; *Research Utilization; *School Personnel; *Symposia; Teachers

ABSTRACT

Various actual experiences are illustrated which relate to the problem of making feedback useful, and certain methods and techniques are offered as possible ways of handling the communication problem. (CK)

ED057081

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

PROBLEMS IN MAKING FEEDBACK USEFUL TO SCHOOL STAFF

Ann Lieberman
Institute for Development of Educational Activities
(|I|D|E|A|)

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
American Educational Research Association,
New York, New York, February, 1971

TM 000 924

PROBLEMS IN MAKING FEEDBACK USEFUL TO SCHOOL STAFF

Researchers have found school people to be defensive about allowing themselves to be used as subjects. Perhaps they have something to hide. But it is certainly true that researchers have not been sensitive to the problems of school people. More often they have been concerned with their own problems: completing a dissertation or writing a good journal article. Some researchers think nothing of bringing a ten page questionnaire to teachers after a hard school day and are then surprised and contemptuous when they find nasty notes on their questionnaires. We have not recognized that people in any social organization do not want to be used. They would tend to be more cooperative if part of an exchange:[1] giving information and receiving a translation of the results of the data collected. And it is our responsibility to make that translation meaningful.

The researcher who has been studying teachers must himself become a teacher. I would like to use two examples from my own experience with 30 feedback sessions from 15 different schools in which such a translation was attempted. In the first instance it had taken me two years to center my research interests on the question of leadership. I was attempting to find a relationship between principal leadership and teacher effects such as morale, professionalism and style in the classroom. Feedback had been promised to

---

1. Blau, Peter, Exchange and Power in Social Life
John Wiley and Sons, 1964

the participating schools. How could I now translate my findings in such a way that the staff would feel that the time had been spent usefully? Having taught in the public schools and been victimized by several researchers sending us feedback with unintelligible numbers, I was particularly sensitive to this problem.

The first thing I did was relate to their own experience. Teachers often say 'this is a good school! you should meet our principal'. "What makes a good principal?" I ask. Not being able to resist some of my new found knowledge, I share several past approaches to leadership. How do we legitimately define a "good leader"? I suggest maybe we are asking the wrong question. Maybe we should be asking, "What are the effects of leaders on their followers?" Having now related to their experience, connected their "know how" to what others have thought about, and defined more specifically "the problem", what can I tell the staff about themselves? Specifically, from my own research, I can describe teachers perception of the principals leadership. Further, I have scores on teacher morale and professionalism. Lastly, I have student perceptions of teachers' leadership.

Another problem now appears. Teachers tend to want data that is immediately useful. What can telling teachers they have low morale and low professionalism do for them? They can't solve it on Monday. But maybe one of our responsibilities is to educate for understanding the complexity of educational problems rather than pretending they are simple. A staff that says that teachers don't communicate with each other, do not care what the other guy is doing, etc. has a problem which may have its roots in any of a number of different areas. Feedback may not solve their problem — but it can help them define it.

What if the data you analyze suggest negative findings? How do you report these data? As an example, in my study teachers reported some principals as being low on an expressive dimension. This suggested principals cared more about subject matter orientation of their teachers than their satisfactions as people. Such items as being fair and showing liking for people were included. How do you stand before a faculty and tell the principal he is aloof and uncaring, or that teachers don't know what is happening in the field of education today? Several options are open. For one thing you can give personally negative feedback to an individual alone. This at least provides some measure of protection for the individual. In dealing with schools, a choice can be provided. "Is this something you are willing to share with your teachers?" I gave this choice to 15 principals and only one chose not to be present when the data were reported. And strangely enough, this staff bent over backwards to take some responsibility on themselves for the failure of poor leadership.

Giving negative group data can often be as difficult as negative individual data. The whole group can now become defensive and hostile. One way to deal with this problem is to let the data speak for itself. "Ninety per cent of the staff said....." or "You reported that teachers never want to discuss educational problems." Still another strategy is to enlist the aid of the staff. "Does this represent the general feelings of your group? Do you meet often?" This offers you some added information and allows the staff to deal with the findings in their own terms. It also makes the data more useful to the staff. A sophisticated group may take the data and attempt some strategies to deal with the problem. A group that lacks cohesiveness may

reject the data and accept it only when it develops the tools to cope.

The second example concerns 15 feedback sessions reporting summary data on problems teachers themselves saw the school facing. Our concern in these sessions was how the staffs would deal with their problems. Feeling it presumptious for us to tell the school what its problems were and desirous of the principal getting practice, we asked that the principal give the feedback.

We had listed the problems in categories such as: Discipline, School-Community, Teacher Cohesiveness, etc. In each category there were quotes from the teachers:

- Misunderstandings between teachers — lack of communication.
- Facing the change in our neighborhood population. We have a small group of trash that causes more than their share of discipline problems.
- Breakdown in staff cohesiveness, loyalty and morale.

Not one of the schools looked at the larger categories that we had so laboriously prepared. Instead, they took the actual quotes of the teachers and dealt with them. We learned from this experience that part of the problem of making feedback meaningful is enlarging the researchers perspective to include not only organizing the data using analytic tools, but taking into consideration the specific needs of school staffs to deal with problems anecdotally.

Negative data drew the same kind of responses as in the first example. Any comment on the part of teachers that there was conflict or principal-teacher problems was too hot to discuss. Five of the principals read

the data on principal-teacher conflict and passed over it quickly. One principal openly said "damn it - there is no problem here with me" — much nervous laughter and on to the next point.

On one staff there was great embarrassment over the statement about "trash moving into the neighborhood". The principal made a gentle comment that this remark was "unprofessional". Interestingly, the teachers chided the comment by presenting a few testimonials like "These children are great — why my girlfriend works in an area ....." No one stated that perhaps teachers' class orientation might be a basis for conflict. The major effort was to make light of the comment. It seems that negative data is always a problem no matter who gives it or who receives it. And that some effort toward making it more palatable is the way both groups and individuals deal with the problem.

To summarize:

1. There are at least two situations in which feedback is given.
   a) In one instance a close relationship is necessary. This relationship assumes an intimate knowledge of the experience of the subjects. We were interested in an ongoing relationship with schools. A cooperative arrangement here suggests sharing the process of research with the subjects.
   b) Often an outsider does a one shot piece of research. He can expect to find much hostility from the schools. This circumstance will continue to deteriorate relations between

researcher and school personnel unless he takes the time to feed back his findings and relate what he is doing to the experience of the schools.

2. As to the question of immediate utility of feedback; in a long-term relationship one has time to explore educational organizational complexities. After participating in three or four feedback sessions, in which the process of getting from the problem to the results occurs, staffs begin to internalize the difficulties of finding answers to what appear to be simple questions.

3. Lastly, negative individual or group data present similar problems. Both groups and individuals seem to have to be ready to cope with the data. However, the presenter can use several strategies presented here:

   a) Give individuals a choice as to whether they want to share the data with the group. (principal and staff)

   b) Let the data speak for itself whenever possible.

   c) Enlist the aid of the group. Ask them if the data, as reported, represents the situation. Allow them to explore possible reasons for negative findings.

The process I have described is time consuming and difficult. It means leading the group through the same process the researcher has gone through, with the crucial addition of relating what the researcher wants to find out to the experiences of the group. It may even suggest a new role for the researcher -- that of a translator.